Good evening, Brethren

I have had the enjoyment of attending many celebrations over the last sixteen years as a member of a Group Executive, but it is certainly one of the special privileges of an Assistant Provincial Grand Master to be invited to take part in the celebration of a brother's special anniversary.

Brethren it is said that the greatest happiness a man can have is to you know that he is loved, and the very fact that there are so many brethren here this evening who have made the journey to take part in this evening's celebration only serves to reinforce that statement and shows the high regard that our celebrant is held in.

But to do that I must first tell you (as if you didn't already know!) who that person is……Brother Provincial Deputy Grand Director of Ceremonies can you please place WBro Phillip William BIRCH PPrGSwdB, on the floor of the lodge before me and ensure that he is comfortable.

So let us think back to 1944 and what was happening in the world, well the sixth year of World War II has started, and the year would see some momentous events:

- WWII: Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle begin a 2-day conference in Marrakech in January 1944.

- The two-year Siege of Leningrad is lifted.

- The 16th Academy Awards Ceremony is held, the first Oscar ceremony held at a large public venue, Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. Casablanca, directed by Michael Curtiz, wins the Award for Best Picture.

- The "Great Escape": 76 Royal Air Force prisoners of war escape by tunnel "Harry" from Stalag Luft III this night. Only 3 men (2 Norwegians and a Dutchman) return to the UK; of those recaptured, 50 are summarily executed soon afterwards, in the Stalag Luft III murders.
- The German navy's Enigma messages are decoded in England almost in real time.

- More than 1,000 British bombers drop 5,000 tons of bombs on German gun batteries on the Normandy coast on the 5th June, in preparation for D-Day.

- D-Day June 6th: 155,000 Allied troops shipped from England land on the beaches of Normandy in northern France, beginning Operation Overlord and the Invasion of Normandy. The Allied soldiers quickly break through the Atlantic Wall and push inland, in the largest amphibious military operation in history. This operation helps liberate France from Germany and weakens the Nazi hold on Europe.

- Adolf Hitler survives the 20 July plot to assassinate him led by Claus von Stauffenberg; he and his fellow conspirators in this and Operation Valkyrie are executed the following day.
- Allied troops attempt the largest airborne military operation in history (at the time) when the Battle of Arnhem (Operation Market Garden) begins on September 17th. The purpose of this operation was for Allied paratroopers to land in the Netherlands and take control of key bridges near the Rhine River from German forces. This was so that Allied troops could push through Germany and end the war much more quickly if successful. Unfortunately, for the Allies, German troops were aware of their arrival ahead of time and had the time to organize against them and destroy many of the bridges prior to the paratroopers' landing. Some Allied forces made it to the Arnhem Bridge, but they were short on supplies and forced to abandon their plans, leaving Germany in control of the Rhine River at that time.

Some very famous people were born in 1944 including, Danny DeVito the movie actor, Diana Ross the singer, Jerry Springer the TV Show host, George Lucas the film director, Michael Douglas the movie actor, Jimmy Page the guitarist, Gladys Knight the singer, Joe Frazier the boxer, Bobby Ball the comic and actor, Roger Lloyd-Pack, actor, (Trigger in 'Only Fools and Horses' tv series), Roger Daltrey, rock singer and probably the most famous of them all **Phillip William BIRCH**.

Phillip was born on 15th January 1944 in Mill Road Hospital, Liverpool to his parents Thomas Birch, and mother Doris.
Life wasn't entirely straightforward in those early years.
At just two years of age, you suffered a serious bout of pneumonia. Thankfully, you came through it, although asthma meant that football fields and rugby pitches were never likely to become your natural home.
Instead... your mother had another idea.
At the age of ten she suggested ballroom dancing.
Now, most ten-year-old boys would probably have needed a little persuasion—but as it turned out, it was one of the best decisions she ever made.
You joined the Billy Martin School of Dance—along with what sometimes seems to have been half of Liverpool—and before long it became clear that this wasn't simply a hobby.
Week after week you travelled to Manchester for specialist tuition, your weekends filled with competitions rather than football matches, and over the next six years you collected an impressive list of trophies and titles.
By the age of eighteen you were representing Great Britain as a member of the first British Youth Team, travelling to Denmark for international competition... and coming home as winners.
Not bad for a young lad from Stoneycroft.
However, I understand your teachers may not have shared quite the same enthusiasm.
Apparently, ballroom dancing became rather more important than homework!
At the age of twenty-two you had turned professional and opened your own dance school in Aigburth.
During this time, you also embarked on a career in the hairdressing industry and once, whilst calling at a hairdressing salon in Derby Lane, Old Swan, Liverpool
You met a young lady called Irene.

Now here's the important detail...
Irene didn't dance.
So rather than teaching the cha-cha, you wisely decided marriage might be the better long-term investment!
I think we can all agree that was one of your better decisions.
You married at St Andrew's Church in Maghull on the 1st May 1968 and, this year, celebrated an extraordinary fifty-eight years together.
Meanwhile, your professional career was flourishing.
After training as a hairdresser, you joined L'Oréal.
At the interview you were offered two positions—a technical role and a sales role.

Being a sensible young man, you chose the one that paid more money!
Within months you were promoted, and what followed was a distinguished career with companies such as Wella and later LEC Ltd, where you spent over thirty-one years.
You eventually became Sales and Marketing Manager and Export Manager, travelling across Europe, Scandinavia, North America and the Far East.
Who would have imagined that the young ballroom dancer from Liverpool would one day be helping to sell hair products across the world?
And, of course, many of us of a certain vintage will remember the famous mousse years.
When footballers like Kevin Keegan and Graeme Souness proudly sported enough curls to make us all slightly envious!
I think we would all agree brethren that some fashions are perhaps best left exactly where they belong... firmly in the past.
Throughout all of this, however, there was another constant in your life.
Freemasonry.
It was almost inevitable really.
Your father Tom had joined Toxteth Lodge in 1950, encouraged by your godfather, W. Bro. Jack Herbert.
So, on the 23rd of November 1966, it was entirely fitting that Jack himself initiated you into Toxteth Lodge.
It's difficult for many newer members to imagine what those days were like.
Liverpool Masonic Hall in Hope Street.
A Lodge with over one hundred and fifty members.
Packed dining rooms.
Waiting lists for office.
Quite a different world from today unfortunately
Only a week after your Initiation you made your first Lodge visit.
Little did you know that the Worshipful Master of Ceres Lodge that evening would later become Provincial Grand Master of West Lancashire.
Sometimes history has a habit of quietly introducing itself.
Your own Masonic journey, however, wasn't always straightforward.
Career responsibilities meant travelling extensively across the country.
Like many brethren balancing family, work and Freemasonry, attendance wasn't always easy.
But here's the important thing...
You never drifted away.
You remained loyal to your Lodge.
You remained committed.

And eventually... after what you have often described—with typical humour—as "thirty years on the back benches"... someone finally said...
"Phill... it's your turn."
In October 2000 you were installed into the Chair of King Solomon.
A richly deserved moment.
But sixteen years later something happened that very few Worshipful Masters can ever experience.
You occupied the Chair once again.
Only this time...
...the Installing Master was your own son, Simon.
The Provincial website quite rightly carried the headline:
"Son Installs Father."
Now, there can't be many fathers who can say they were placed into the Chair by their son.
Nor many sons who can say they had the honour of installing their father.
For both of you, I suspect, it remains one of life's proudest memories.
Freemasonry, after all, is about family as much as fraternity.
And speaking of family...
Simon himself became one of Toxteth's youngest Worshipful Masters, while grandson Aaron already seems to be showing all the qualities of another future Lewis.
The Birch family tradition looks to be in very safe hands indeed.
Over the years you've served your Lodge in almost every office imaginable.
Treasurer.
Secretary.
Mentor.
Advisor.
Friend.
The only office you've somehow managed to avoid is Chaplain...
Although Phill... there's still time!
In 2003 you joined Hamer Lodge No 1393 and one of your former colleagues in that Lodge is here tonight to celebrate your anniversary, W.Bro. David JOHNSON PAGDC Assistant Provincial Grand Master.
In 1991 you continued your Masonic Journey when you were Exalted as a Companion in the Royal Arch in De Grey and Ripon Chapter No 1356.
Your commitment has quite rightly been recognised by the Province through successive promotions, in 2009 you were appointed as Past Provincial Senior Grand Deacon, in 2015 you were promoted to

the rank of Past Provincial Grand Superintendent of Works culminating this year in your promotion to the high rank of Past Provincial Grand Sword Bearer.
Those honours are not awarded simply because someone has completed sixty years.
They are bestowed because someone has spent sixty years making a difference.
That difference is measured in quiet conversations with new members.
Reliable service when nobody else notices...
Steady leadership...
Wise counsel...
And friendships that last a lifetime.
That, Phill, is your legacy.
The high esteem in which your held in freemasonry is evidenced by the number of Brethren who are here to celebrate your anniversary, some of whom have even travelled from Scotland.
Away from Masonry you've also demonstrated remarkable loyalty elsewhere.
Fifty-eight years of marriage.
Over thirty years with one employer.
Sixty years in Freemasonry.
There's a pattern emerging here...
Once Phill commits to something...
...he tends to stay!
Brethren, our Order is built not only upon ritual and tradition, but upon people.
People who quietly turn up. People who do the jobs that need doing.
People who support others without seeking recognition.
People who simply make Freemasonry better by being part of it.
You are unquestionably one of those people.
On behalf of the Provincial Grand Master, the Province of West Lancashire, your Lodge, your family and your many friends...
Thank you.
Thank you for sixty years of loyal service.
Thank you for your friendship.
Thank you for your example.
And thank you for reminding us of what a lifelong commitment truly looks like.
Phillip I'm sure I speak on behalf of everybody present that we are absolutely delighted to see you here this evening to celebrate your 60th anniversary as a freemason and even more so that you have allowed us to celebrate your special evening with you.

Phillip such is the importance of your own Diamond jubilee that our Provincial Grand Master Right Worshipful Brother Mark Francis Matthews has caused a certificate to be struck to mark this wonderful achievement which I shall now ask the Group Vice Chairman Worshipful Brother John Gibbon to read….
Phillip, on behalf of everyone here, I thank you for your service and I congratulate you on achieving this milestone in your masonic career and I hope that you continue to enjoy your freemasonry for many years to come.
Brethren please be upstanding and join me in congratulating W. Bro. Phillip William Birch PPrGSwdB on sixty remarkable years in Freemasonry.

W.Bro. John P. Murphy
Past Senior Grand Deacon
Assistant Provincial Grand Master